

Supple Leather Coats Replace Those of Cloth

BY ANNE RITTENHOUSE.

There is much of the spirit of medievalism as well as its actual presence in the fashions of the hour.

It is masculine medievalism, not feminine. It is an old story, more than twice told, that the designers of the last four years have drawn their inspiration for women's clothes from the costumes worn by men in the centuries that preceded this one. It has proved a rich field. We have plowed it, dug up treasures in it and used many a spade and hoe to unearth nuggets of inspiration.

It is never a dead past. The designers keep it alive in the minds of women more than the historians keep it alive in the memories of men. This is the reason that it may be safely said that nothing new has been invented in apparel in the last hundred years. It only appears new to each generation. It puts on an attractive guise of youth like some Faust who has drunk of a miracle brew, but it has really been through a few centuries of existence.

What's the odds? If it appears new to us, if it has an air of pristine freshness, if it excites the imagination, lures coin from the purse, and aids and abets the dressmaker in making a fortune, then who cares how old it is? History repeats itself—why not fashion?

Often the designers do not even take the trouble to turn the old into something that resembles an unusual novelty. They realize that the human memory is about the shortest sense that man possesses, so, trusting to this, they merely offer a tunic, a hoopskirt, a kimono, a sash, high boots, flat-heeled slippers, garlands of roses, panniers of tulle and backless bodices in a sequence of fashions.

The public talks of a skirt that is wide at hips and narrow at hem as though it were a garment new as the telephone at its invention; there are women interested in daguerreotypes who look back upon the family album with sadness and merriment, and say of certain fashions that they were worn by their grandmothers as if that finished them, but, after all, the general impression concerning the vast kaleidoscope of style is vague.

Upon this vagueness rests the success of a thousand dressmakers. In the last three years the fashions have been old enough to be interesting.

The civil war is too close upon our heels, the Franco-Prussian war is still a fresh memory in the minds of the living, the American Indian has been portrayed at fancy dress parties until the novelty of the costume is lost (and there are some in this country who still shudder at the name and the apparel). Therefore, when the designers discarded the epochs that were dimly fading into shadows behind us and reached down into the depths of human history to pull out clothes that reeked of the tenth century, from Venice to London, they made the public gasp.

We knew nothing of tunics and jerkins, of armholes that ran to the waist, of chemise frocks, of heavy silk ropes as girdles, of sandwich panels that were dropped down back and front of an underdrill that had long sleeves to the knuckles.

Bold embroidery, braiding with gilt galloon, ornamentation with straw were decided novelties to us. They were not revolutions like the long trousers worn by the men of the directoire period, or the plateau of straw worn by a king to keep the rain from his head, or the long tights to the thighs that the fighters of Great Britain took up as substitutes for the clinging robes that flapped around men's ankles, or even the leather shoes that had brass eyelets through which lacets were run, as substitutes for the long woolen stocking with its foot part extended five inches beyond the big toe.

The world had made its startling revolutions in style before we breathed on this planet and there have been none so bold and none so clever as to threaten to overturn them, with the single exception of the introduction of trousers into feminine apparel.

Along that line we have gone far. The riding breeches which once shocked the community were the precursors of an accepted form of apparel for women who indulge in sports. Shades of Mrs. Bloomer and Dr. Mary Walker! All that these women did to emancipate women from skirts failed entirely until the sporting life in the open air became correct and fashionable for all women who desired to be lovely and healthy.

We have not originated, therefore, but merely revived forgotten garments.

In the last two years the bulk of the fashions have been founded on clothes worn in Great Britain and France in the middle ages, and surely few but the students knew aught of them.

The chemise robe made of rough material and girdled around the waist with a cord, the frock the Countess of Jersey wore when she milked her cows in those long ago centuries, has been too frequently seen on our streets and in the most polite gatherings to cause astonishment. The pointed shoes, which are an American

Fashion for a New Kind of Leather as the First Aid to a Tailored Suit.
New Coats Are Worn With Homespun Skirts—Several Shades of Deep Brown.



The figure at the left shows a short-skirted sport frock of leather and suede in a dead leaf brown. The tunic fits the figure like the jersey of other days, and is girdled with a narrow belt of Russian leather with a black buckle. The stockings are of ribbed brown wool and the shoes are tan color built in the Scottish golf shape.

production, are copies of those worn by peasants, when William the Conqueror ruled in England. They were woven in the kitchen at that time, but today they cost anywhere from \$15 up.

Thus it was that the designers ransacked those ancient days in the British Isles, when men were strong and women fair and fighting was the rule, for fashions to offer to a gay, wealthy, overcivilized set of women during an era of bloodshed that had not been equalled in the entire stretch of the middle ages.

Upon this medieval severity with its sumptuous embroideries and gorgeous fabrics was grafted the somber, but splendid, apparel of old Russia. Ancient again, these designs for the most modern of women. Peter the Great may have banished the costume of the Bayards from the court of St. Petersburg and instituted the gay and almost feminine brilliancy of the French costumes for men, but the peasants clung to that which the nobles rejected; so when Adolph Bohm and Lean Bakst brought into Paris the splendid Slavic costumes, Paris was ready to accept them with more enthusiasm than Peter the Great's nobles gave to the French costumes centuries ago.

With the general acceptance of the costumes of a day that was so different from ours, except in its fighting, there came about a tendency on the part of women to wear masculine attire more than ever. They did not know it was the contour chosen by the men who have made this world what it is, but they looked upon it with more favor than upon frills and flounces, blue ribbons and boned bodices, precious laces and cameo pins.

They imagined that their type did

The figure next wears a fanciful sport tunic of pink suede, heavily fringed and boldly embroidered in pale yellow wool. The collar is wide and folded like a hood about the shoulders. There is a fringed girdle tied at the side.

not go well with this latter frivolity of dress. They thought of it only as the especial kind of French costumery that had led its leaders to the guillotine.

And now that women have become accustomed to severity of cut, to scantiness of material, to the corsetless figure, and even to the bobbed hair of the pages of the middle ages, the dressmakers offer them one more bone, as it were, to please their appetites until there comes a change of sartorial diet. Which means that Italy of the fifteenth century has its innings.

That is why we wear leather. It may seem a long cry from the leather coat briskly worn by a smart young woman on a shopping tour to the scrolls of ancient leather placed upon Florentine clothes; but the two have a common bond. One sponsored the other, or rather, one was responsible for the other.

Fashion, like rumor, has a way of getting out of hand. It runs away from its source and breaks into a dozen rivulets. It is often hard to trace its beginning.

This is the case when one realizes that the leather jacket worn with a homespun skirt instead of a coat is one of the rivulets that came from the original introduction of fifteenth century Italian cut-out work six months ago.

When the designers took it into their heads to go back to romantic Italy for unusual combinations in color and ornamentation and found leather work as a suggestion for clever ideas, they rather overdid the fashion.

However, it may be necessary to draw large in order to attract the public's attention.

There were two firms in France last August who came out at the beginning of the season with whole costumes of leather. These were Bernard and Martial et Armand. Their exhibitions came early in the month, and leather, plain and perforated, was the most unusual thing they offered.

Each house had evening capes of leather, one had a hunting pink leather blouse trimmed with fur and cut low in the neck, and both houses had waistcoats and simple blouses of white and colored leather. Bands of perforated leather were put on redingotes, they trimmed the front of skirts, and were used on sleeves. A white leather frock was so entirely covered with the cut-out pattern that its combination with chiffon did not seem unsuitable. It was really evanescent in itself.

The Americans thought that leather blouses would be the decided fashion offered by the French that we would accept on this continent, but, as far as the season has gone, we have not taken it up. We have run off on a track of our own. We looked at leather as a new fashion, considered it carefully, then decided that we would accept it in an American manner. Instead of perforated evening coats of white leather, we made short, dashing jackets of thin brown leather and added tan homespun skirts and Russian leather high shoes to make up a street costume.

As a substitute for a pink kid pepum blouse trimmed with brown fur, which is really an exceedingly attrac-

tive costume and should be given more popularity, we took up jerkins of tan velvet, belted them with embroidered girdles, and used them much in the same way that a warrior of the middle ages used his breastplate. The sleeves that emerged from the sides of the leather jerkin were sometimes of knitted wool, belonging to a sweater or a frock.

These breastplates of heavy tan leather have proved effective in winter sports worn over gowns of ribbed wool in the green of spring trees, and there are green ribbed stockings and heavy tan brogans to complete the costume.

The observer feels that this constant use of leather on the street in the form of jackets and skirts is a harbinger of spring fashions. It may be that when the warm days arrive we will take up the French idea—which will then be nearly a year old—to make blouses of perforated kid and trim chignon frocks with it; but at the present moment we are more concerned with combating the weather and we find that leather does that very well.

Last season a woman wore her brother's army coat, put beneath it any old skirt she possessed, and called it a rainy-day costume. But the tailors have taught her better than that. They have brought out a number of rainy-day coats in leather and whole suits of it in order that the tailored suit, which is such a great expense these days, may be saved for high days and holidays, or rather, for sunshine and dry streets. Instead of the army coat, heavily made and clumsy in appearance, the tailors offer leather jackets cut to the figure, made of supple kid, with belts, pockets, high collars, and a decided feminine air.

The smart thing is to have a whole suit of leather, the skirt cut exaggeratedly plain and short with seams down each side, the hem just touching a pair of heavy leather boots put over tan colored wool stockings; the jacket above the skirt is double-breasted and has army pockets that really carry bundles. This suit can be crumpled up in the hand. If the jacket is not warm enough for a bitter day, one slips a brushed wool sweater under it.

The woman who cannot afford a whole suit of leather tries to content herself with the jacket; but she no longer wears this with any old kind of skirt that hangs in the wardrobe. She obtains a thick English homespun skirt made with wide, lapped seams, four rows of stitching, and a deep hem either broadly stitched or invisibly caught.

The tailors are not hesitant in offering knee-length and hip-length leather coats as a substitute for cloth coats. They seem to be able to get hold of the jackets of leather easily and, therefore, spare themselves the time, labor and expense, to say nothing of the irritation and disappointment, of having a coat made in the workrooms.

Every woman knows that a tailored jacket is quite the most difficult garment to get right in the whole gamut of women's apparel. Thousands of tailors boast perfection along this line, hundreds fall short of it. Some who boast do not know how to put in a sleeve, others who demand high prices do not know how to arrange a shoulder seam, those who insist that no one is superior to them often get an underarm seam too short and are not sufficiently competent to completely flatten the hem of the jacket, and there are literally hundreds who do not know how to pose a collar.

It is at the armhole and the collar that the vast majority of tailors fail. To pay \$300 for a coat suit today does not guarantee one a perfectly posed collar nor a sleeve that hits the wrist at the right place. And think of \$500 for a suit!

If men had to pay that price there would be a revolution. Women pay it throughout the cities of this continent, and though they protest, they do not countermand the orders.

A man's suit consists of three pieces, while a woman's suit has only two; the skirt of a woman's tailored suit is not as difficult to make as trousers; the same is true of the coat; there is slight difference in the amount of material used; yet a well dressed man can get a well built suit for \$100 and consider that he pays a high price, whereas a woman starts at \$200 this season and is asked nearly \$100 if there is fur.

Is it any wonder that with such staggering conditions facing us, the leather coat takes the place of the cloth jacket? That it is a fashion which is sponsored by the best tailors as well as those women who must snoop around, as it were, to find out where they can get the maximum effect for the minimum price.

These leather jackets are not cheap. The best sell for about \$90 at the exclusive department shops and for \$125 in some of those gray salons where French clothes are shown.

Army coats modified from regulation are cheaper. They can be bought at the sporting houses and are worn by athletic women who adopt actual bad weather clothes that give service.